

TESTIMONY OF JON WILLS
Columbus, Ohio

HB 172 —Fireworks Legalization and Regulation
October 26, 2021

Chairman Hoagland, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the Senate Veterans and Public Safety Committee. My name is Jon Wills and I have been a physician, patient, and public health advocate for more than 45 years. I am testifying today to express my continued opposition to the proposed substitute version of House Bill 172, which would permit Ohioans to discharge consumer grade fireworks up to 21 days a year.

I have testified in opposition to this bill and previous versions of proposed Ohio's fireworks law revisions so many times that I know many of you are tired of hearing from me; however, I question why a hearing about this bill was slipped into the calendar at the last minute with no opportunity to try to have a meeting of the minds. As a retired Executive Director of an Ohio health care association, I remember when legislators, opponents and proponents of legislation used to come together in interested party meetings to try to find solutions to problems. It was never an easy process, but everyone tried very hard to find common ground, examine the unintended consequences of proposed legislation, and find consensus solutions that everyone can live with. Real "compromise" on thorny issues was not a dirty word. It wasn't a dirty word then, and it shouldn't be today. "My way or no way" is not the way to build "communities."

There is no entirely safe way to discharge fireworks in any setting. Accidents happen even under the best of circumstances with professionals in charge. Aerial displays of any intensity, therefore, should be left to the professionals. The neighborhood discharge of fireworks is disruptive, dangerous, frequently abused, and a threat to "peace in the community" with a potential for damage to property and serious injury and even death. We all read about the massive fireworks explosion at the block party in Toledo this summer as well the death of the Columbus Blue Jackets goaltender in Novi, Michigan. Still, here we are today.

- Nearly half of all fireworks injuries are to innocent bystanders –many of them children. Of the 10,000 fireworks-related injuries last year, 36 percent were to children under the age of 15 -- nearly 3,600 children.
- Fireworks cause traumatic reactions to the explosions for an estimated 100,000 Ohio veterans, suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.
- Fireworks cause stress and anxiety for our household pets and farm animals; nearly 62 percent of Ohioans are pet owners.
- Firework discharges already cause mediation and enforcement dilemmas in communities for police departments, fire officials and emergency responders. This bill will dramatically add to the problem.

While I am strongly opposed to HB 172 for public safety and accident prevention concerns, this bill also interferes with my rights as a property owner to ensure that my family and home remain safe from loud noises, potential property damage and personal injuries caused by the irresponsible discharge of consumer grade fireworks, particularly during neighborhood parties where alcohol may be present.

True, HB 172 does allow counties, cities and some townships to either ban fireworks or restrict the times and dates for consumer discharge; but, the abrupt change in the statewide law to suddenly allow fireworks in all communities will lead to confusion among Ohio consumers and inconsistencies in enforcement for police and fire officials as local options are forced upon local jurisdictions to be implemented. Since the discharge of consumer grade fireworks are currently illegal on a statewide basis, any change in local laws must be based on an OPT IN process for allowing discharges, NOT THE OTHER WAY AROUND.

Let me give you a real-life situation. My home is currently in the City of Columbus. The property behind my house is in Norwich Township. Norwich Township's law enforcement is handled through an agreement with the City of Hilliard Police Department. I have already experienced problems with loud parties this summer and problems are seldom if ever resolved on a timely basis. The City of Columbus, where I am residing, has a noise ordinance. Norwich Township, which is directly behind my property, does not. This means as an Ohio taxpayer, I will need work with three different jurisdictions to pass consistent fireworks ordinances and call two different police departments when fireworks violations occur if HB 172 passes.

Firework displays in Ohio currently bring people together to celebrate national holidays and other local festivities in a regulated and, hopefully, safer environment. This bill, however, will potentially pit neighbor against neighbor in trying to protect their homes and families. I realize there are many outstanding issues to be resolved with Ohio's existing fireworks moratorium law, but HB 172 creates many more new problems than it resolves at the present time. Thank you for allowing me to testify today.